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AUTHOR Ritchie, L. David
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ABSTRACT

The role of temporality as a cognitive and cultural factor in communication processes has been largely neglected in communication research. However, it is possible to examine the representation of time on three levels: allocation of events or actions to categories (as in sacred time versus profane time), temporal orientation, and the content of past or future images. The content of mediated messages (e.g., television programs or novels) may readily be analyzed according to their temporal orientations; certain media may even tend toward one or another orientation. It might also be expected that various orientations would lead toward different kinds of information-seeking and processing behavior, as expressed both in media use and interpersonal communication. At the societal level, future-orientation is largely dominated by "futurology," the attempt to anticipate the future through projecting a continuation of present trends. The free imagination is given more play in science fiction, but usually only the technology is futuristic--the social structure tends to reflect a continuation of the status quo (nuclear family, democratic capitalism, etc.) Temporality may prove to be an important field of conflict between the individual and society: the role of the media in this conflict may be of considerable interest. (NKA)

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Of Time and the Media: Issues of Temporality in Communication Research

L. David Ritchie
Institute for Communication Research
Stanford University
Stanford CA 94305

Ph. (503) 948-2574

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Of Time and the Media:
Issues of Temporality in Communication Research

Abstract

Communication researchers have largely regarded time as a quantitative dimension of communication behavior (e.g., sequence and duration of communicative acts). The role of temporality as a cognitive and cultural factor in communication processes has been largely neglected in our field. This paper reviews models of temporality and suggests an approach to the communication issues raised, both by the role of temporality in processes of social reality and by the role of mass media in shaping individual and collective images of time.

Of Time and the Media:
Issues of Temporality in Communication Research

INTRODUCTION

Bardwick (1978) has suggested that individuals need both firm anchors in their past and a sense of a future that will be fulfilling and worth striving for. Polak (1973) has argued that a society as a whole needs idealistic and inspiring visions of *what might be*, both to maintain morale and to provide the impetus for a continual renewal of the spirit and vigor of the society. "The rise and fall of images of the future precedes or accompanies the rise and fall of cultures... Western man must never stop thinking and dreaming the materials of new tomorrows, for he has no choice but to dream or to die."

Temporal orientation, in particular orientation toward the future, has received considerable attention from psychologists, often working under the assumption that an orientation toward the future is a hallmark of "modernity" and a prerequisite for successful integration into adult society. Aside from the *therapeutic* interest in the individual's ability to integrate his past into his experience of the present, past-orientation has received much less attention.

Zarubavel (1981) argues that a shared orientation toward time (including the past and future as well as the passage of

time in the present) is an important element in social solidarity and control. *Values* are often rooted in the shared past, and focus on hopes for the future. Certainly temporality is a central theme in mass communication: the content of fiction and non-fiction alike is often concerned with either the past or the future, and the mass media are primary sources of information about past and future.

There has been surprisingly little attention to the relationship between the communication process and temporality. Back and Gergen (1963), based on secondary analysis of public opinion polling data, demonstrated that temporal orientation can have a significant influence on the respondent's opinions about current issues ranging from foreign affairs to wearing seat-belts. They also demonstrated a relationship between social factors such as age and occupation and temporal perspective; subsequent researchers focussed on Back and Gergen's findings with regard to age, to the almost total neglect of the theoretically more basic concept of temporality.

This paper will suggest three levels on which to examine the representation of time: *allocation* of events or actions to categories, based on Zerubavel's (1981) discussion of sacred time vs. profane time; *temporal orientation*, based on Polak's (1973) discussion of the temporal image; and the *content* of past or future images. It will also briefly review the research literature on temporal perspective at both the individual and the social level. The literature on (individual) "future time perspective," or FTP, although extensive, is ambiguous and inconclusive. Most of the FTP research has focussed entirely on the

purely quantitative ratio of the time spent thinking about the future to time spent thinking about the past or present; the *content* of the individual's images of the past or future has received much less attention. Similarly, at the societal level future-orientation is largely dominated by "futurology," or the attempt to anticipate the future through projecting a continuation of present trends.

Finally, a set of research questions will be proposed, for studying both the treatment of temporality in mass communication and the effects of communication on the temporality of individuals and groups.

ALLOCATION OF TIME

Zerubavel (1981) identifies two important dimensions in the social structuring of time: *sacred* vs. *profane* time and *private* vs. *public* time. Events may be interpreted quite differently, and quite different behaviors deemed appropriate, depending on the location along one or another of these dimensions.

For Jews, observing the Sabbath is both source and symbol of unique identity. The Sabbath is ritually sanctified, segregated from profane time by both beginning and ending rituals. There are, according to Zerubavel, different degrees of sacredness; the Sabbath is marked as the most sacred of all. The 'Lord's Day' plays a similar role to Christians, who deliberately chose Sunday for their sabbath in order to mark the separation of the Christian sacred calendar from the Jewish. Mohammedanism achieves an even more radical segregation by basing its calendar on the lunar year, not the solar year.

Private time (during which one's social accessibility is suspended or limited) is separated from public time by similar, albeit much less sanctified, rituals. Private time, Zarubavel notes, is typical of the separation of role from identity: doctors, for example, who enjoy much higher social status, and hence much greater role-identity than nurses, also mark a much less clear distinction between private and public time. The private / public distinction, then, contributes to the "alienation of labor"; it also contributes to the liberation of the laborer from the absolute control of the organization, by putting boundaries around the employer's right to interfere in the employee's use of time.

For specific groups or individuals, other categories may be important. For example, individuals might distinguish between fantasy time and real time, play time and serious time, and so forth. What all of these categories have in common is that (1) certain actions or events are regarded as more appropriate in one kind of time vs. the other, and (2) actions and events (including communication acts) may be *interpreted* differently, depending on the classification of the time in which they occur.

A TYPOLOGY OF TEMPORAL ORIENTATIONS

Polak distinguished modes of thinking about temporality along two crucial dimensions, (1) *linearity* and (2) *imagination*. *Linearity* has to do with envisioning time as a sequence of unique and non-repeating events, as contrasted with the *cyclic* view, in which time is envisioned as an endlessly repeating cycle of identical events, or the *dimensionless* view, in which both past

and future are essentially collapsed into the instantaneous present. *Imagination* has to do with what Polak labelled "the duality of the now and the Other;" the ability to conceive of an alternative state of the world different from the present *status quo* (see Figure 1).

- Figure 1 about here -

The Eschatological orientation envisions time as linear, moving from a definite beginning, through a series of unique moments or events, toward a finite ending, while utopian thinking (which includes negative utopias, or "dystopias") stands *outside* linear time. *Utopia* literally implies another location in *space*, but utopias are frequently positioned in time--often in the remote future. (As Rabkin, 1978, points out, utopias also frequently look *backwards* toward an idealized past.)

Both eschatology and utopian / dystopian thinking share the quality of imagination: as such, they are inherently critical of present reality. Eschatological thinking calls for radical reorientation of present reality, both in preparation for the anticipated "end of time" and in order to acknowledge or fulfil the meaning of the historic "beginning of time." Utopias challenge the unique factual status of present reality, by describing in detail a different state of the world and asserting that this different reality can be brought into existence.

In the *positivist* view of science and history, both past and future are envisioned as firmly anchored in *present* conditions. In principle, at least, sufficiently detailed knowledge about the present would also specify everything that one might wish to know

about the future--or, for that matter, about the past. Knowledge about the past is interpreted through present reality; similarly, future conditions can be *projected* as a linear continuation of present trends.

In the most extreme form (the *discount* model), both past and future are compressed into the known present. In economic terms, the past is represented exclusively as a dynamic balance between resources and claims on resources, and the future is represented by a discounted flow of expected future earnings. These may be fully realized *in the present* by placing them for sale on the futures market, or by offering them as collateral for a loan. The only thing distinguishing past from future is the rate of change, the "discount rate." The *discount* model of temporality stands opposed to the utopian vision in an essentially dimensionless time.

Time can also be viewed as *cyclic* rather than linear. In the anchored form, most fully developed in religions such as Hinduism, time is viewed as one cycle or a series of cycles of creation and destruction; these cycles are fully-determined and cannot be altered by human (or even, in the most extreme form, by divine) intervention. On a sufficiently long time-frame, past and future are identical. Similarly, the imaginative "duality of now and other" is meaningless.

In a less fully-developed and more "imaginative" form, the cyclic view of time stresses the importance of "being in harmony with nature." In this, the *harmonic* model of temporality, the cycles of nature (e.g., seasonality, the human life-cycle) are regarded as being of paramount importance; living in harmony with

nature and with one's fellow-man is given priority over planning for the future (and hence, in our own culture, over industrial productivity).

Finally, a few religious thinkers (notably the Buddha) have taught that time is wholly illusory. The conditions of Being can only be understood by moving beyond such ideas as past and future. The *transcendant* view of time implicitly criticizes the preoccupation of ordinary people with time, progress, and change.

These orientations can be applied at either the social or the individual level; subcultures (such as adherents to a specific religion) may share an orientation, or individuals may express one or more orientations in their dialogue with other individuals. The *content* of mediated messages (e.g., television programs or novels) may readily be analyzed according to their temporal orientations; it may also be that certain media tend toward one or another orientation. For example, the linear and sequential presentation in the print media may tend to emphasize a *positivist* orientation.

The way people approach such questions as morality, education, and employment may be quite strongly influenced by their orientations toward temporality: an eschatological or utopian orientation might lead to idealism, while a discount orientation would lead to a careful accounting of costs vs. benefits. We might also expect that the various orientations would lead toward quite different kinds of information-seeking and processing behavior, as expressed both in media use and interpersonal communication.

Conversely, the influence of the symbolic environment on temporal orientation may also be of interest. To the extent that mass media serve a "hegemonic" function, we would expect them to favor orientations (such as positivist or discount) which are more consonant with the *status quo*, and to downplay or discredit the more *imaginative* challenges of the eschatological and utopian or dystopian visions.

To date, these questions have received minimal systematic study. The bulk of attention, especially in psychology, has been devoted to "Future Time Perspective" (FTP), the degree to which the individual thinks about the future as opposed to the present or past.

FUTURE TIME PERSPECTIVE (FTP)

Lewin (1942) suggested that personality traits such as the deferral of gratification may be related to the individual's ability to project into the future. Early researchers in "future time perspective" (FTP) found the expected relationships, not only with deferral of gratification (Klineberg, 1968) but also with need for achievement (Agarwal and Tripathi, 1979), various forms of mental and emotional disturbance (Klineberg, 1967), and the efficiency of doctoral candidates in progress toward completion of their dissertations (Goldrich, 1967).

Subsequent theorists have suggested that differences in 'future time perspective' (FTP) might provide a ready explanation for different levels of achievement between males and females, and between members of different social classes and cultures (O'Rand and Ellis, 1974; Cottle, 1976; Von Wright and Von Wright,

1977; Camilleri and Michel, 1980). Differences in temporal perspective between social groups, in turn, have been explained as a result of different life situations: "a future orientation which primarily focuses on the near future and lacks complex structuring can well be adaptive for socially disadvantaged and economically deprived groups" (Trommsdorff, 1983; see also Agarwal, Tripathi and Srivastava, 1983; Bouffard, Lens, and Nuttin, 1983).

Overall, the results of research in FTP have been mixed and ambiguous. Koenig, Swanson, and Harter (1980) report a curvilinear relationship between future-orientation and social class. Neither Roberts and Greene (1971) nor Khoury and Thurmond (1978) found any evidence of systematic relationships between ethnicity and FTP in the southwestern U.S.; Sundberg, Poole, and Tyler (1983) found only ambiguous differences between samples of fifteen-year-olds in the U.S., India, and Australia.

Lessing (1968) and Gjesme (1979, 1983) have suggested that the ambiguity of previous findings may be in part due to a multiplicity of instruments, which measure several distinct constructs. Platt, *et al.* (1971) and Rakowski, *et al.* (1983) also report findings suggesting that the various measures of temporal perspective may share little common meaning.

***Apocalyptic time perspective*:**

Researchers in public opinion have approached the issue of temporal attitudes from a somewhat different angle. Back and Gergen (1963) defined time perspective in terms of two poles: "One pole may be called 'apocalyptic'--each event is the last

one. The other pole can be called 'serial'. If one thinks that a nuclear war or Communist victory would be a unique event, leaving no hope, then long-range planning is futile; the only question is, how badly do you want to avoid the event."

Based on analysis of national survey items Back and Gergen found that apocalypticaly-oriented persons, compared to serially-minded persons, are more likely to want extreme changes to occur, such as more power for labor, outlawing the Communist Party, or fighting Russia right away. Apocalyptically-oriented persons also oppose long-range programs like foreign aid, and tend to be pessimistic (predict a worsening economy, declining power for the U.S., etc.) Farber (1951) also found that individuals who experienced frustrations in the outlook for their own future seem disposed to wish for a war as a means of resolving the international crisis. The effect did not occur with people who had experienced frustrations in the *present*.

Back and Gergen argued that people who perceive their mental peak as ahead of them are more likely to have a serial time perspective: hence, older people are more likely to have an apocalyptic time perspective, while younger people are more likely to have a serial time perspective. Back and Gergen also linked serial time perspective to optimism, and to such traits as the willingness to gamble, either on the roll of the dice or by refusing to wear seat belts, and suggested that time perspective should provide an explanatory concept for the similar effect on many attitudes of education, occupation, and age.

Social Futures

In spite of the ambiguous findings, the underlying insight that the ability to envision the future in clear and realistic terms should contribute to the individual's success in adapting to changing environmental conditions still seems valid. It seems equally apparent that social groups would benefit, possibly even more than individuals, from the ability to think clearly about the future. Many formal organizations (corporations, government bureaus, etc.) include a systematized planning function, although the results are of uneven quality. Indeed, it would seem that organizations, like individuals, may possess different degrees of future time perspective. In any event, the discipline of 'futurology' has emerged, in recent years, to help satisfy the quickening corporate thirst for visions.

According to Ingersoll and Rich (1978), futurology "is conceived as an institutional form of knowing," inherently suited to the bureaucratic need to find technical solutions to political problems. Futurology derives its predictions by extrapolating present conditions according to the assumption of continuous change within an overall situation of stability. Because existing structural relationships go unchallenged, "the process of grounding alternatives in the present is tantamount to a restriction on the range of possible futures."

The genre of science fiction, in which the free imagination is given more play, would seem to provide a basis for alternative futures. However, as Martin (1980) points out, science fiction grew out of a fundamentally conservative desire to promote the advantages of science and engineering. In most science fiction,

only the technology is futuristic; the social structure tends to reflect a continuation of the *status quo* (the nuclear family, democratic capitalism, or even, in such atavistic romances as *Star Wars*, a return to feudalism and royalty).

Where science fiction does depict alternative social structures, it tends to depict them either as a horrifying and dehumanizing abomination (e.g., *Brave New World*) or as self-destructive romanticism (*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*). Only a few science-fiction writers have seriously questioned the assumptions underlying the current structure of society: a notable example is Ursula LeGuin's *Eye of the Heron*, a thoughtful treatment of the way militarism and militant pacifism feed upon one another. Austin Tappan Wright's *Islandia*, although perhaps not fully within the genre of science-fiction, provides another example, in which the Jeffersonian vision of an enlightened agrarian democracy is contrasted against imperialistic world-capitalism. As Martin (1980) observes,

> At its best, science fiction is infused with a sense of wonder, a realization of the capacity of the human mind to transcend the constraints of the present and to experience the idea of the creation of the universe. Futures research is the assimilation of science fiction to organizational society and to organizational needs. Futures research is the reconstruction of science fiction into the thought forms of organizational society.

Boniecki (1980) argues that it is essential to distinguish between the *social* and the *individual* time horizons. At the present, "the traditional *social* horizons reflected in our institutions appear shaky." Based on interviews in Australia, Boniecki concluded that (1) most people do not think or visualize more than a few months to a few years ahead because (2) they are

too preoccupied with the problems of the immediate present. Bjerstedt (1979), based on a study of adolescents, found that knowledge or consciousness of the future is seldom very strongly developed. When the respondents think of the future at all, they see it mainly in technological terms and hardly at all in social terms. Surveys conducted by Camilleri and Michel (1980) in France, England, and Italy suggest that adolescent thinking about the future, especially about the future of society, is strongly and negatively colored (and perhaps to a large extent blocked) by pessimism about the prospects of nuclear war, environmental degradation, or other large-scale disasters.

These findings suggest several questions for research. For example, what role do the mass media play in (1) encouraging pessimism about the future of society and (2) focussing images of the future on the *technological* attributes to the exclusion of social or cultural attributes? Is it possible that the media "co-opt" the future by presenting social conditions and processes as if they always came "tied up in a neat package" and hence are unalterable?

The basis for future orientation

Considering the extent of the research literature on the *importance* of future orientation, surprisingly little attention has been given to the cognitive, informational, and social factors which determine how effectively individuals--or groups--are able to plan for and prepare for the future. Researchers such as Klineberg (1967, 1968) have pointed to the importance of the child's cognitive development in providing the conceptual

capacity for thinking about the future, and several researchers have discussed FTP as a possible intervening variable, connecting gender, social class or cultural background with such constructs as achievement motivation or the ability to defer gratification (O'Rand and Ellis, 1974; Cottle, 1976; Von Wright and Von Wright, 1977; Camilleri and Michel, 1980; but see also Koenig, *et al.*, 1980; Roberts and Greene, 1971; and Khoury and Thurmond, 1978). Other writers have explained the possible influence of social variables on FTP by reference to social or economic deprivation, which might make an extended FTP less useful, or even maladaptive, for members of certain groups (Trommsdorff, 1983; Agarwal *et al.*, 1983; Bouffard *et al.*, 1983). A detailed consideration of how people think, communicate, and act toward the future, and what resources they require to do so, is still lacking.

Logically, in order for an individual to think and plan effectively for the future, she would need to be able to achieve at least three things: (1) *envision* one or more possible futures; (2) *plan* for a future, that is, envision a series of specific actions which will lead to one future rather than another; and (3) *act* effectively according to the plan. These three requirements apply at both the personal and the social level. At the social level, the group must have mechanisms for each of the three requirements; in order to participate in the group's future-oriented activities, i.e., in order to influence the social-level future, the individual must also be able to meet each requirement with regard to the social future.

(1) *Envision* alternative futures: the individual must be able to form a realistic idea of what different futures might be like. This might take the form of veridical images (e.g., a detailed representation of what the "ideal job" would be like) or it might take a more conceptual form. The key is that the envisioned future match the individual's *abilities* (as she understands them), her *interests* and her *desires*. The envisioned future must also match her actual or potential resources (for most of us, an envisioned future that involves living in a Manhattan penthouse or a fifteenth-century Spanish castle is not of much use as a guide to action, although it can provide other rewards). Veridical images of *negative* or undesirable futures may also be useful, as a benchmark against which to compare the desired future. For example, the image of a future as a college professor may not be enough to motivate the sacrifices required to complete an advanced degree, without the contrasting image of a future as a faceless bureaucrat or a "Willie Loman."

(2) *Plan* for the future: the individual needs to be able to envision a realistic series of actions, which will lead to the desired future rather than to the negative future. A plan will probably not include a complete series of actions, but if the individual cannot even envision the *first* action in the series, nothing at all can be done. The individual also needs a sure sense of personal *efficacy*: a belief that (a) she is able to act in a way that advances her plan and (b) her actions have some chance of succeeding.

(3) *Act*: if an individual's visions of possible futures are to have any meaning or validity, she must be able to *act* in such a way as to bring them into being. The ability to act includes having information about what actions are required, knowing the correct timing for each action, and having the time and resources to take the correct action at the right time.

The ability to *envision* and *plan* for alternative futures, as well as the ability to act toward the future, implies a need for *information*. The individual may need information about what futures are available, about the actions required to activate various futures, and about her own capabilities, talents, and resources (compared to the requirements of a specific future). A musically-gifted individual cannot plan to become a symphony conductor if she is not aware of the existence of that role; nor will it do her any good to envision a future as a symphony conductor if she doesn't know how one goes about preparing for the role or if she is unaware of the extent of her own talents.

Social support may also be crucial to an active future time perspective. While an individual may be able to think about the future and take actions to bring about a certain future in the face of disapproval or scorn from other people in her social environment, negative attitudes in the social environment certainly increases the emotional cost, and reduces the probability of success, in future-oriented endeavors. Furthermore, others in her social environment may present demands for her time and resources which conflict with her future orientation. Farm families, for example, even while encouraging their children to make ambitious plans for the future, often keep them so busy with

chores that there is little time left for gathering information and developing talents to realize those plans. Similarly, a classic complaint of feminists has been that women are often expected to pursue their dreams for the future in the *residual* time, left over from child-care and housework duties.

Finally, some futures are by nature co-operative. There is probably very little that a single individual can do, no matter how future-oriented she is, to avert nuclear war or ecological catastrophe, or to bring about a more equitable distribution of life chances, unless at least a few other people are willing to co-operate with her on the project.

Research questions include the role of media in providing images of and information about alternative futures, the effect of the micro-social communication environment (particularly in the family and school), and the role of the media in co-ordinating or fragmenting collective future-oriented endeavors. How do individuals learn about prospective futures? How do they get information--about prospective roles and about their own resouces--on the basis of which they can plan for a desired future? How do individuals cope with resistance to their future plans and visions (e.g., from family and associates at school or work-place), and what role do the media play in buttressing or undermining their ability to cope?

A larger set of questions--concerning both future and past--arises from considering the role of temporality in the formation of an individual's identity, and in the dialectic between individual consciousness and "social reality."

TEMPORALITY AND SOCIAL REALITY

Social reality is used here in the sense of the zone of interaction between the individual (considered as a cognitive system) and society. This section will discuss the role of concepts of temporality in social reality; e.g., in mediating the relationship between individual and society. Images of past and future are important both for the integration of the individual into society and for the maintenance and transmission of social structure and values. Concepts of the past furnish the basis for individual identity: only to the extent that the individual can maintain control over her own concepts of the past will she be able to maintain a discrete sense of herself as an individual. Concepts of the future form the nucleus of individual hopes and aspirations. To the extent that the individual has achieved the difficult task of establishing a unique identity, she is likely to experience conflict with her various social groups over her concepts of the future; conflict will also arise when multiple groups present conflicting claims upon her future.

According to Zarubavel (1981), society presses its claims upon the individual, in the form of conventions of meaning and behavior, in each of four categories of temporality (sequence, duration, density, and location). Spontaneity--uniqueness of individual behavior--may be contrasted with conventionality along each dimension. The demands of the various categories of temporality may also come into conflict. Images of the future, for example, may require that actions be accomplished in a particular sequence, while time may simply be unavailable due to

conventional demands on a person's durational time. I.e., the *durational* time may be unavailable to perform *sequential* actions in support of *future* plans or ideals. Similarly, conceptions of the *past* (identity) may conflict with conceptions of the *future* (plans or ambitions).

Remembrance and interpretation of the past provides a means of predicting the future; consequently, it also provides a major tool for establishing one's identity. Because I know my past, I can predict how I will react to certain events in the future, and hence, "what kind of person I am." Similarly, remembrance and interpretation of a shared past provides a primary source of *group* identity and solidarity. This takes perhaps its most extreme form in the liturgical (e.g., Jewish or Christian) re-enactment of the historic events and actions which form the basis of a shared identity as "God's people." National holidays (The Fourth of July; Bastille Day) serve a similar purpose for nations; married couples re-enact their wedding, high school and college classmates hold periodic reunions to re-enact *their* shared histories, and so forth. It is important to note that mere *memory* is not sufficient: the individual must also know *why* a thing happened and what it *means*. *Interpretation* is crucial.

Often, groups may claim the right to interpret the individual's past to him (e.g., the Christian doctrine of 'original sin' and the Marxist doctrine of "false consciousness." Families often tell their children stories of what happened when they were very young--these stories pointedly anchor the child's identity in the overall identity of the group.

The future may also be a locus of conflicting claims. First, the individual may entertain hopes or ambitions which are directly at variance with what the group considers appropriate or desirable. The boy who wants to be a ballet dancer or a poet while his father wants him to be a football star or a lawyer is a cliché, as is the child who dreams of marrying for love while his family plans that he marry for position.

More generally, differences in representations of time (Figure 1) can stimulate conflict within a group as well as between groups: a frequently-remarked characteristic of adolescence is a kind of utopian idealism, which often challenges the 'discount' or 'positivist' orientation of the adult generation. Eschatological thinking can lead to a similar conflict ("I come to bring not peace but a sword.") Conversely, when members of a group *share* a somewhat unique view of time, identification with the group can be enhanced; as remarked in the foregoing, this can be a primary function of "sacred time."

Research questions include both the *representation* of time and the formation and transmission of specific images of past and future. With regard to the representation of time, both the interaction and conflict between different orientations (e.g., pragmatic and linear vs. cyclic or imaginative) and disagreements over the assignment of certain events, expectations or memories to Zarubavel's categories of private-public or sacred-profane may fuel a dialectic between individual and society, which can be either creative, or divisive and destructive.

Individuals or groups may also differ with respect to the *content* of specified images--either memories of the past or hopes

for the future. The debate over creationism may be viewed primarily as a conflict between competing views of the past, how it is to be known, understood, and interpreted. Similarly, the debate over nuclear power contrasts two images of what the future will contain, and can be interpreted as a conflict over the interpretation of these images. Conflicts also arise at the small group level (e.g., between spouses, over issues such as planning for careers, education, investment, and retirement).

No less important are conflicts over the past. People may--and often do--disagree over what *happened*; even more frequent are disagreements over what it *means*. From the courtroom trial to the constitutional debate, from the marriage counsellor to the synod of a great church, people's lives, their relationships to one another and to society are deeply affected by the process of establishing and interpreting visions of the past.

Much of the content of the mass media deals, directly or indirectly, with the past, the future, or both. How do these images affect (1) the social representations of temporality and (2) the ability of individuals to make sense of their private past and to think coherently about their private futures?

SUMMARY

In the past, communication research has considered time primarily as a quantitative dimension of communication behavior (sequence and duration of communication acts, time allocated to media use, etc.) Although past and future play an important role in the intergenerational transmission of values, the maintenance of social cohesion, and the ability of individuals to anticipate

and adapt to change, these constructs have received little attention from communication researchers.

Zerubavel (1981) proposed two somewhat parallel distinctions in temporality: *sacred* vs. *profane* and *private* vs. *public*. Although Zerubavel's distinctions are presented as applying primarily to the *passage* or use of time, they can also be readily applied to the treatment of past and future. For example, the Creationist-Evolutionist controversy in contemporary American society can be interpreted as a quarrel over the segregation of the *sacred* from the *profane* views of the past, while religious millenarianism often presents itself as an attack on the segregation of *sacred* from *profane* views of the future.

I have further proposed a typology of orientations toward past and future, based on Polak's (1973) dimensions of *linearity* and *imaginative* approaches to temporality. To some extent, these types overlap with Zerubavel's distinctions: the eschatological view of time is most frequently sacred in origin, although secular movements such as environmentalism and anti-nuclear activism often take on a decidedly eschatological tone. Conversely, the sacred view of temporality also embraces cyclic and transcendant orientations. Utopian orientations may be either sacred or secular.

Finally, the content of representations (individual or public) of the past and future is in itself important: what is remembered as having happened, and what is represented as probable or desirable to happen in the future?

It has been suggested that the interaction of temporality with communication--both mass communication and interpersonal communication--may be of interest in several ways. First, the temporal orientation of a medium or of media content may be of direct interest, both for its effect on the orientations of individuals and as an expression of the orientation of the social groups with the greatest control over media content. Second, the temporal orientations of individuals may condition how they interpret and use media: their information-seeking behavior, the implicit assumptions they bring to the interpretation of mediated messages, and so forth. Finally, temporality may prove to be an important field of conflict between the individual and society; the role of media in this conflict may be of considerable interest.

While the literature on future time perspective (FTP) provides a useful starting-place for examining temporality in communication, it has been suggested that we need to advance considerably beyond the level of investigating the *quantity* of time a person spends thinking about the future vs. the past, and look toward *how* he represents future, past, and the flow of time itself, as well as the interaction between the representation of time at the individual and at the group level.

Figure 1
Social Representations of Time

	Anchored:	Imaginative:
Cyclic Time:	**Wheel of Fate** Future = repeat of past Anchored in cycles of nature Change neither desired nor resisted	**Harmonic** Present preferred to future Opposed to industrialized time Human relations elevated over industrial productivity
Linear Time:	**Positivist** Past trends ==> future Future based on continuation of past trends Assumes long-term stability of social structure	**Eschatology** Eschatology is anchored in the end of historic time Usually also anchored in a historical past event Calls for radical change in the present
Dimensionless Time:	**Discount** Past = resources in the present Future expectations discounted to the present Accounting structure closely matches social structure	**Utopia / Dystopia** Outside of linear time Often grounded in an idealized past, reflected into the future Criticizes the present by contrasting to a possible alternative reality
Opposed to Time:	**Transcendance** Present reality, including time, is regarded as illusory Time is the source of illusion Critically confronts preoccupation with time and change	

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